

The Heresy of Cheap Grace

Romans 11:6

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Do you know how Romans and the Greek-speaking people of the first century were able to pick out the Christians so easily in their society? It was because of the Christians' behavior. The Christians behaved differently to everybody else. I don't know if you realize it, but one of the great banes of life in the first century was the Plague. Plagues and epidemics of all kinds ravaged the major cities of the ancient world. And when the citizens of Rome or Corinth or Philippi realized that the disease had got out of hand they all acted the same way: they grabbed all the belongings they could and fled the city as fast as possible, lest they catch the plague. They left homes behind, they left belongings, livestock, they left their own relatives behind because they were so afraid of these epidemics and plagues that got completely out of hand in those days.

But the contemporary historians all testified to the one fact: everybody fled except the people called Christian. And even if they had escaped the city already, if they knew there were victims back there in the city, their own relatives or others' friends, they went back despite the threat to their own lives, and they rescued those people. And so they were most noticeable in the society of the first century by the fact that they did not seem to fear death and that they would do whatever was needed to express the love and the kindness of their God to others.

The Christian faith changed the way they behaved. It was the same in the 18th century in England. In the 18th century in England, all the vices and the inequities that were plaguing French society were present in English society. There was an upper class that was indifferent to the needs of anybody else but itself. There was a middle class that wanted power and the ability to rule and there was a working class that saw no reason for living at all, they were so poor.

And yet the evangelical revival of Christian faith under Wesley so changed people's attitudes to one another that all historians say the same as Lackey: "The evangelical revival of Christian faith saved England from a French Revolution." And that's true, loved ones. Again, the Christian faith changed the behavior of the society so that the classes began to show real humanity and concern and care for one another. And so they avoided the catastrophic revolution that almost destroyed French society.

The Christian faith again changed the way people behaved. I think it was just a little over thirty years ago that the same authentic kind of revival of Christian faith changed life in an area that I think most of you know about, but few of us have ever been to, the Northern Hebridean Islands of Scotland. I don't know if you know Scottish people, but I suppose I'd be Scots-Irish, and apart from the Irish side, we are a dour lot, we really are. And in the Hebridean Islands of Scotland, we are a dour, silent lot. They can endure and bear a lot but they don't show much excitement or much interest in anything. And the Hebridean Islands of Scotland were like that, until about 30 or 35 years ago, when they experienced a Christian revival of religion.

It was a dramatic movement of God's spirit in the society that meant that many came to know God because of their attitude to Jesus. And I think I have shared with you before that it so affected the lives of the community that people were giving back things that they had stolen, and apologizing to others for things that they had done. And it so affected the lives of the people in community,

that the judges and the magistrates wore white gloves in the courtrooms for the first time in living memory because they had no criminal cases to try. So again the Christian faith changed the way people behaved.

Today in America everybody knows the phrase “born again.” Evangelical Christian faith is more popular in America today than almost at any other time in our history. Our president is born again; members of the opposite party that are ousted have been born again, since the tragedy of Watergate. There are TV stars who have been born again, there are singers who have been born again, there are football players who have been born again. There is more money spent on Christian television and Christian book publishing than at any other time in our history. There are more people attending church today than virtually at any other time in our history. And yet, crime on the streets of our cities has increased steadily and relentlessly. That's true.

We have an anomaly in America at this present time, we have something that calls itself the Christian faith, but does not seem to radically affect the behavior of our society. Here we have a break from the authentic classic Christianity that has been expressed throughout the world, down through the centuries. Here, we have a Christian faith that does not seem to change the way people behave. It has not at all affected the incredible increase and crime that goes on from year to year in our society, both petty and violent crime. This is a kind of Christian faith that seems to be different from the way God's spirit has ever operated in the past. It is not producing a change in people's behavior.

Now why? Why do we face this anomaly? Why are we facing a great rise in Christian activity and you must admit, it's everywhere, it's almost sickening it's so everywhere! But why are we experiencing this tremendous increase in evangelical Christianity, and yet no real change in the morals of our society? We have a society here that professes Christianity loudly, individuals that profess it loudly, and yet in individual and in social life, they evidence the entire moral and the psychological and the social breakdowns of the pagan world. And they do, you must admit, they do.

Many of us here have had all kinds of moral, social, psychological break downs, and yet they say, yes but we are Christian. Now why loved ones, do we face this? What is wrong with the gospel that we are preaching in these days that is preached on radio, on television, that is shared by us in our books and with each other? What's wrong with this gospel? Because it isn't producing the same results as it has produced in the past, in other societies.

Two words describe it. Two words express the problem with our present gospel: “cheap grace.” That's it, loved ones, honestly, “cheap grace.” We are preaching and living a Gospel of cheap grace, not costly grace, but cheap grace and the verse that we're studying today is one of the verses that is used repeatedly to reinforce this idea of cheap grace, and it's Romans 11:6. “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.” That's a great and a true statement but we misuse it and we misinterpret it. “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.”

Now, we are not the first, loved ones, to follow this heresy of cheap grace. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian, who you remember was executed in connection with the plan to assassinate

Hitler, wrote in his books repeatedly of the resurgence of cheap grace in our generation. George MacDonald, the Scottish preacher whose writings led C.S Lewis into real Christian faith, pointed out that cheap grace is the idea that Jesus' death covers our sins so that God can't see them even though they are there, instead of the true grace that believes that Jesus' death is there to destroy sin in us. That's what drew C.S Lewis to the gospel when he saw that Jesus' death is not there to cover up our sins so that God can't see them, but Jesus' death is there to destroy sin in us so that we can be like God.

Paul you remember was so straight in that letter that we read (Romans 6:1-4, 6, 7) that said "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may have abounded? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Don't you know, that those that were baptized into Christ Jesus, were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into the death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. We know our own self was crucified with him, so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin."

But that isn't the gospel that is preached on the whole among us. It isn't. Speaking to my colleagues who are pastors -- we may think we preached that, but that isn't what the majority of us are getting. Loved ones, I know this because I've talked to so many of you and I've listened to you and the majority of us get this gospel: "God once decided that only those who obeyed the Ten Commandments would get into heaven. But he saw that we couldn't obey them and that we all sinned everyday in act, thought and word. So he changed the condition: he punished his own son instead of us for our sins so that any of us who believe that he did that would get into heaven, whether we obeyed or not."

Now, loved ones, you may sit there and say, "no, that's not what I got" but that's what the majority of our society believes. They believe that the gospel is this: that God once required obedience to the Ten Commandments from us, but he saw that we couldn't obey, because we sinned in act, thought and word everyday. So he changed the condition and he punished his own son instead of us and then he said, any of you who give mental assent to this idea, that I have done this, will get into heaven.

So the majority of people who hear the gospel today have the idea that they are now at last relieved from the fear of future retribution of any kind for their sins. So they don't even have fear, which the normal agnostic has to keep him from sinning or to limit his selfishness. They have the idea "it doesn't matter what I do, it doesn't matter about sin or obedience or anything now. Obviously, God isn't concerned about those things. All he wants me to do is to believe that his son has died for me and he'll let me into heaven whatever I do." So Christians tend to feel "well lets face it, I'm getting into heaven anyway because I believed Jesus died for me. I've got to do my best, I certainly do. I've got to do the best I can, to obey what is convenient for me to obey, but any falling short in my part, will be covered by Jesus' death anyway. So, really it doesn't matter whether I obey a lot or a little as long as I make a good shot at it, I am going to get into heaven anyway."

Loved ones, the majority of Christians feel that God has changed his mind; that he once required obedience to his laws, but now he simply requires mental assent to the idea that Jesus' death will get them into heaven. So they have adopted that mental assent attitude and they've believed that's all that's required. So we have a monstrosity now in our society called "the Sinning Christian."

The Christian feels that you have to avoid sin if you can, but if you can't, it won't hurt him and God will forgive him and that's all that's needed. And so he does his best but he has the feeling

all the time that it doesn't matter even if he does as well as a non-Christian and that's the incredible thing. Have you ever thought that? Sometimes I've looked at loved ones who are not Christians at all and they seem to have a greater sense of responsibility to love other people and be kind to other people and to be honest and above-board in their business, than many Christians do. Because sometimes the Christians feel we have a free ticket into heaven anyway, so there is no great constraint to particularly avoid immorality or be moral. Whereas the poor old non-Christian, who hasn't that kind of cushion, feels, "Well, I better be as good as I can, in case there is a "man" up there and he is going to meet me at the end."

But loved ones, is it not true that the majority of us feel that's the gospel. That God once required us to obey his commandments, but he saw we can't possibly do it so he invented this new idea of punishing Jesus instead of us so that if we give mental assent to that idea we'd get into heaven? Of course it's meaningless to the intelligent agnostic. Do you know that? It is meaningless. The ordinary, intelligent agnostic can see nothing but injustice in a God beating up their own guy for somebody else's sin.

The ordinary agnostic thinks it's madness. How can you claim that a God is just, if he kills the wrong person for somebody else's sin? And of course the ordinary agnostic doesn't want to be in heaven because he thinks if it's going to be filled with all these weak-willed ideologists who aren't at all like Jesus, I don't want to be there. So the normal agnostic thinks this is foolishness but what many Christians do is, they so solemnly say, "Oh, brother but that's the foolishness of the gospel." Well loved ones, it's not the gospel at all, it isn't.

What is the true gospel? The true gospel is pointed out clearly in that verse that we have often quoted in Matthew 1:21, where the angel said to Joseph and Mary, "You shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins", not "in" their sins but "from" their sins.

God does not change; he is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He has always wanted us to be like him. He has always wanted us to live in accordance with his will. He did not create an Old Testament of law and obedience, and then replace it with a New Testament of indulgence and disobedience. God has always wanted us to be like him, but he looked down and saw that we had used our free wills to get from the world the love that he wanted us to get from him. Moreover he saw that by that activity over centuries, we had perverted our own personalities, so that they were so utterly dependent and addicted to things and people for love that we could no longer obey his will for us.

So he saw that, but loved ones, he did not then back off and say, "All right, I am content to have a group of satanic demons with me forever, who are not like me." He did not say that. Immediately he made a plan to bring us into a state where we would be able to obey his will. He took our perverted little personalities that cannot do good, you are right about that: "The good that we would we cannot do, the evil we hate is the very thing we do (Romans 7:19)." He took those perverted little personalities, destroyed and remade them in the cosmic depth in his son Jesus, in the supra special world of eternity.

Now that general death and resurrection that destroys the urgings to anger and jealousy in each one of us, that general death and resurrection can be experienced by you and me day by day as we submit to the working of the Holy Spirit, who realizes that death and that realization in us as we live each day, as we submit to God's will with Jesus whatever the cost or the inconvenience. By that means do you see that that miraculous destruction of sin in each one of us that took place in Jesus'

eternal death can be made real day by day so that we move from glory to glory? So that instead of Jesus' death being a historical static event, which we give mental assent to as a reason for our free ticket into heaven, Jesus' death becomes a dynamic present operating principle within us and the power that begins to deliver us from self, and from self-centeredness, and from sin. But loved ones, it is costly, it is costly grace.

Grace means two things, first of all unmerited and undeserved favor. That was costly to God. God showed unmerited and undeserved favor towards all of us in this room, because even though he could have left us in our perverted tangled personalities, he generously of his own free grace took us and put us in Jesus, and allowed his Son to bear the unbearable agony of having our old contorted personalities with their addiction to people's opinion and to selfishness and to pleasure, destroyed in Jesus. Out of his own unmerited and undeserved grace and favor he did that. That's one meaning of grace and it cost. It cost to the very point where Jesus felt he was losing touch with even his Father and cried, "My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?" That's one meaning of grace and it was infinitely costly to Jesus.

The other meaning of grace is that as we submit ourselves to this death to ourselves with Jesus day by day. His death and resurrection is actualized in us, but only through our paying the price, and it is a price loved ones, it is a costly price. The Holy Spirit will come to you when you're demanding satisfaction from your loved one, or when you're demanding respect and acknowledgement from a colleague at work, or when your anger is rising as somebody doesn't give you what you feel you ought to have. The Holy Spirit will come and will say to you, "You were crucified with Jesus. As he died to the unjustified treatment the Roman soldiers were meting out to him, so you died with him. Now do you want to stay with him or do you want to get off this Cross?" And at that point you'll have a price to pay.

If you want to continue to experience the power of Jesus' life in you, you'll have to say, "Lord I will; I'll die to what they think of me, I'll die to my right to reply in anger here, I'll die to my right to get what I want. Lord Jesus I'd rather be with you with nothing, than on my own with everything." And at that point the grace is costly, loved ones. That's why Thomas a Kempis talks about "The Royal Road of the Holy Cross" because it is a daily experience of self denial and of dying to what the Holy Spirit is exposing to us of our old self that was crucified with Christ but that we aren't yet willing to let go of. That's what real grace is, and that's what the real gospel is. And of course you can see it's exciting in one sense, and yet it's hard and painful in another. Yet, loved ones, as you begin to go through scripture, you begin to see that that gospel makes sense of all the verses of scripture and of that verse in

II Corinthians:5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Or think of the verse Roman 6:6-7, "We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin." Think of that one in Roman 8:3, "For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit": in no sense that Jesus died instead of us -- in every sense that we died with Jesus. Above all else what did this Gospel do? Oh it changes us from sinners into saints. It changes us from children of darkness into children of light, it changes our lives so that the world stops and stares, and begins to wonder by what power you have done this.

There's a contagious disease in the world, and our dear Maker is saying, "I have an antidote for it.

Submit yourself to these series of injections that I want to give you as you live your life day by day and I will forgive, and it means partly I will give before you ought to receive it. I will forgive you the life that you would have if you'd never had this disease, but you must submit to this series of injections of my Son's life, that will involve the taking away of some of your own life that you treasure." And that's the moment the evangelical world is standing back and saying, "We believe that's true, so we're free from the disease." And you see you cannot be free from the disease unless you submit yourself to the treatment, but the evangelical world stands back and says, "We believe that, we believe that if we submitted ourselves to the treatment, we would be healed and we would be cleansed. Therefore we are healed and cleansed." And that's why, loved ones, the Spirit speaks to one of the seven churches in the last days and says, "You think you are rich and whole and healthy, but you're poor, blind and diseased." And I think that that's the state of much of our evangelicalism, because we believe a truncated gospel that is no gospel, because it is simply a mental assent. It is a mind game. It is not a submission of the will to our dear Savior's experience for us on Calvary.

Now I would pray that you would not listen to this and go back to a pure mental assent, to an idea. I would pray that we might be among those who would begin to be changed, and to express scriptural holiness throughout the length and breadth of this land, because that's what it needs more than anything else. A lot less of the talk, a lot less of even the TV shows, and a lot more Christ-like men and women who are honest and kind and don't lose their temper and make the same impression on this world as our forefathers made.